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Dissertation on the demerits of empiricism

Gardner Barlow

Yale University.

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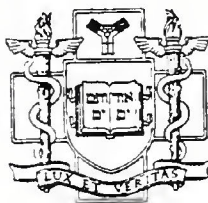
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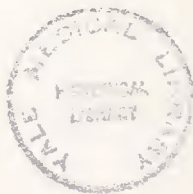
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II.

Dissertation

on

The Demerits of Empiricism.

By

Gardner Barlow

of Meriden, Connecticut,

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor in Medicine.

The demerits of empiricism

Before proceeding to discuss the demerits of empiricism permit me to say that by it I mean all departures from or perversion of the science of medicine as taught in medical colleges generally at this time.

Although the term in its most limited sense, may be applied only to those who venture on their own experience without regard to system, yet the same will apply with equal force to all quacks.

Thompsonians, Homoeopaths and all their kindred deceivers have tried to borrow enough from the profession to form a separate system. But never to my knowledge has the result of their labour benefited their fellow men. In order to make my ideas intelligible I shall endeavour to show that the character and standing of the medical science is such as to merit and deserve exclusive patronage. Then show the nature and tendency of empiricism.

All who are acquainted with ancient history are well aware that all practice was empirical, and not only so but surmounted with all kinds of sophistry and deception for nearly four thousand years. According to the most authentic account of the early periods of the world no regular system had been established until about four hundred years before Christ. Very few if any correct deductions were made from experience until the time of Hippocrates. He appears to have been the first man in the profession who "judged carefully for himself and accepted those sentiments which seemed to be founded in sound reason". The high honour of having originated the science of medicine was a just tribute of respect bestowed on him for the numerous benefits arising from his devoted attention to the improvement of the healing art. The darkness that had so long obscured

the profession than began to give way.
and although the facilities for obtain-
ing correct knowledge was exceedingly limi-
ted, yet the productivity of his mind
and the purity of his motives reflected an
honour and stability on the profession that
has lived along with his fame, and will
continue to live and ~~go~~ grow brighter and
brighter until virtue and fame shall
be extinguished or time itself shall die.

We do not think that any man should be
worshipped because he has made great advan-
ces in the acquisition of knowledge or shed a
bright luster on all his works. Yet there were
many connected with this science whose me-
mories we love to cherish because the benefits co-
nferred by their toil demand it ^{of} our honours.

We not only love ^{to} read their works and ponder
their opinions, but improve by their example
and imitate their skill. Those men have
passed away but their memories perish not
While we thus look and admire, we shall

Never forget, that many are now engaged
in the same ^{cause} with equal ardour whose reward
would be far too small if dollars and cents
were to form the sum of it. But no we feel that
generations yet to come will ascribe praise to all men
who have advanced the interest of such a cause.

As a testimonial of the value of such men I point
to medical colleges medical societies, medical asso-
ciations of various kinds. I point to Hospitals
Alms-houses. Asylums &c as sure evidence of
the competency of the medical faculty. I ask
you to compare medical colleges with others.
If we estimate their utility by the talents
and learning of their teachers I hazard not-
hing in saying they occupy as honorable a po-
sition as any others. If we judge of their use-
fulness by the collateral facilities they possess
for imparting correct instruction they have
no equals. Nor are the requirements in
them for graduation obtained with less
talents or labour than the degrees of other
colleges. If the members of the bar or sacred

desk who has been commissioned to occupy these responsible stations are entitled to more confidence than the mere pretender then so is the physician equally above the empiric. Indeed it is through this medium alone that we have a right to expect merited distinction in this profession. It is unsafe to repose confidence in the ability of any man to treat successfully the various diseases of the present day without his having been inducted to his profession through a regular course of study. This is the only pillar on which the perpetuity of the science depends.

This science has for its foundation the everlasting principles of usefulness and truth and it has stood and it will continue to stand from age to age and from century to century unimpaired by the rise and fall of all empiricism for they have not a vestige of intrinsic value except it may be now and then a speck borrowed from this mighty temple or a crumb gathered from some unworthy source. How far Medical Colleges

and associations have succeeded in diffusing and maintaining correct principles I leave for others to determine. But I think all will agree with me that the talents and acquirements of Medical men forms no small part of the intellectual wealth of the world.

The very nature of the profession is calculated to awaken every faculty of the human mind. The object of their attainments is the ability to cure all diseases. The incentive to action is as great as they are diversified and painful.

If it were an easy matter to treat successfully all the diseases that come before us then we might with propriety place a low estimate on the great capital of medical knowledge that has been accumulating for so long a period. But this is not the fact. The experience of all mankind from the birth day of disease to the present moment is calculated to teach the importance of cultivating this science with peculiar care. Most medical men at least have been alive to this

serment for many years. They have
not been satisfied to rest their exertions
without yearning efforts to elevate and render
the science still more and more useful.
They have tried every means to eliciting
inquiry, to arrive at truth, and to establish a
common interest in the general prosperity
of the cause. They have been liberal and boun-
tiful in their awards of money and respect to
all who have contributed to the attainment of
this object. Thus has an enquiry been awake-
ness the benefits of which extend to every bron-
ch of the profession. Such is now the condi-
tion of each department that whether ta-
ken separately or together they exhibit as
much profound thought deep consideration
and learned study as any other enterprise
recorded in history. The anatomical structure
of the human system is fully understood. The
form, the office and the requirements of every
organ has been the subject of careful investigation.
Physiology too has been examined with great diligence

Those laws by which vitality and healthy action are maintained have been unveiled with nice precision. These are interesting studies and would naturally awaken the attention of every profound scholar. Indeed few can be indifferent to know those great principles by which "we live move and have our being." But a far greater interest is felt by the physician who knows they are the groundwork of all surgical and pathological study. Additional interest may arise from the fact that these are the most permanent as well as interesting branches of medical science. Other departments are often undergoing changes. But these know no increase or diminution. The opinion of men may change in regard to them, but man as he came from the hand of his Creator is encased with a perfect form and phenomenon by which life and health are maintained. This form and this phenomenon constitutes the true principles of Anatomy and Physiology. While these harmonize and remain

unaffected by disease or accident his only requirements are healthy food, air &c To repair the natural loss occasioned by the continued action of the several functions of the body.

All who legally enter the profession are so instructed in these that they can apprehend and appreciate its morbid changes.

These changes constitute another very important part of this science. No one has prosecuted the study of anatomy and physiology long without finding his way obscured with pathological changes. It is in view of these that we attach so much importance to the former branches. At the time when Hippocrates, Galen and many others were making such untiring efforts to perfect the science of medicine their exertions were embarrassed by the laws that forbade dissections and post-mortem examinations. But now we have a different state of things. Never will the votaries of this science rest their labours until all diseases are described and changes in them shall cease.

They are ~~arranged~~ also in such a manner as greatly to assist the physician in the performance of his duties. Clear and correct nosological views are as important to the practitioner as order is to the mechanic.

When he fully understands the relation that exists between diseases and the place which properly belongs to each one, he has obtained a great advantage in the prosecution of his labours. The department of surgery has attained a high standing among the numerous branches of this science. The enterprise in this department is so great that men scarcely know the spot in his fellow man where the surgeons knife has not entered. It has found its way to the private glance with safety. It has removed deformities the most appalling and diseases the most dangerous. But the extension of the limits of surgery does not so much excite our admiration as the improvement in the manner of relieving those for whom the knife is the only remedy.

The Knife has always been a terror to some even when guided by the hand of the most talented and skilful operator. So far then as they have succeeded in simplifying operations they have rendered the profession and the community an essential service. Many thereby will receive the benefits of their skill who otherwise would have been altogether inaccessible.

Many of the operations that have caused extreme pain and great dread. Some that have inflicted suffering almost beyond endurance as well as great hazard are now performed with ease and safety. While ^{the} departments ^{of} have been considering have accomplished much ^{time} and talents still we do not find an insurmountable barrier to the advancement of this noble enterprise.

Dark and gloomy as are the manifold diseases of the present time; Painful and destructive as they have been to happiness and life; Varied and insidious as their approach has often been, they are not uncontrollable.

Almost all created things have been explored

To find remedies and not without effect.
Chemistry, Botany, Mineralogy &c have all unbo-
somed their rich treasures and bade the phy-
sician welcome. The God of nature seems to have
designed that he should drink at every fountain.
At least the field is vast and almost boundless
from which he derives his remedies. The form in
which these are most useful, the method
of administering them and the circumstances
under which they are most advantageous has been
demonstrated in so many ways and on so many
occasions that no just ground of doubt remains
as to the competency of the medical faculty.

In short to deny their exclusive right to
confidence is either to shut our eyes against
the plainest principles of truth, or deny our own
convictions of sound reason. This I think must
be the irresistible conclusion of all who take the
trouble to examine the true merits of this
science. It is a generally admitted fact that
the more knowledge and experience an indi-
vidual has in relation to his particular calling

the more confidence may justly be reposed in his ability to accomplish his undertakings.

This is an axiom that will apply to all the transactions of life, and yet some will make the very place where it applies the most appropriately an exception. What system or mode of practice except the one I have been considering comes to us clothed with learning and experience? What other one bears upon its character the impress of reason? None: no not one.

Never have they realized to the world what they profess. Most of them have been decoyed in some low haunts of inebriance and vice, for no other purpose but to gain money. It is true empirics count distinction. They are anxious to be thought great but are too indolent to become so by industry and strife. They would be considered wise and humane. But their wisdom is deception and their humanity is treachery. What savage of the wilderness so base as to pretend that they have something new and valuable when they know they have not? And who but an infamous

witch could trifle with the afflictions of a fellow being by withholding by patent or otherwise a valuable remedy. The principles of Thompson and all patentees of medicine should cover them with everlasting infamy.

It is painful to think that any one should so far degrade the noble powers of the human intellect as to countenance such ignorance and depravity as there manifest. There is not intrinsic value enough in any patent medicine to recommend itself to public favour.

The Thompsonian practice has become the most extensive system of quackery known at this time, yet according to the acknowledgement of the originator of it, none could be more incompetent than he. In his book called "Thompson's practice" we find the following language. "I have no other assistance than my own observation and the natural reflection of my own mind unassisted by learning or the opinion of others. This was said in regard to his qualifications for originating a better sys-

tern of medical knowledge than the world has
ever before enjoyed. A large part of this book
is devoted ^{to} a narration of the aggressions of his
life and the treatment he has received from
what he terms "The regular doctors" This is done
evidently to gain the sympathies that are
generally bestowed in rich profusion on so
many gross imposters. The following quota-
tion from his book will show whether it is
likely that he has been met with a more
unbecoming spirit than he has manifested
towards the medical faculty. He says the
regular physician, "depends upon his theory
of poisons, with his shield of technicalities, be-
hind which to screen himself when honesty
wishes to examine his Hydra-head and other
deformities while the plain unassuming Thom-
psonian takes his remedies in one honest and
confidence in the other, and truth for his
shield grapples with the Hydra and with
these Herulean clubs we see the heads of the
monsters dropping daily.

in the foregoing allusion to physicians in
stead of "the monster" if he had used the term
our patients I think it would have been mu-
ch more appropriate as the following case ^{will} show.

I was called on Sunday ~~December~~ 22. 1844 to visit a
child of— in meridian age one year and six
months. On my arrival I received the follow-
ing intelligence. On the Friday previous the
child appeared slightly indisposed, but no seri-
ous manifestation of any disease. Saturday it
appeared to have a cold but was still about. At
night its respirations were rather more frequ-
ent. Sleep somewhat disturbed. Sabbath morn-
ing there not ~~being~~ much change in the
symptoms, a Thompsonian doctor was called.
He visited the child about 9 A.M. Ordered
some composition tea and a teaspoonful of
Tincture Lobelia every ten minutes (to be taken
clear) This was continued until two o'clock had
been administered with^{out} vomiting. At about
four P.M. the symptoms became alarming and
I was called in. I found the skin hot and

dry. Tongue slightly coated and deglutition difficult.
No evacuation from the bowels during the last
24 hours, nor discharge of urine after it commenced
taking the lobelia. A rather effort had been made
for the ^{child} except to give a little sal. eam. and water
with the view of aiding the operation of the lobelia.
I administered two teaspoonfuls of castor oil at the mo-
ment and injection as soon as they could be prepa-
ared. Also the body to be sponged and stimulat-
ing cataplasms to the extremities and demulcents
to be given with Spt. St. Dul. Evacuations from
the bowels were soon procured and the thirst
and heat of the skin abated but slight
convulsions continued and the child died at
about 8 o'clock in the evening. about ten hours
after the first dose of lobelia was administered.
This is only one of a great number of most pain-
ful memorandaes of the awful consequences of
quackery. To show the character of the revised
edition of "Thompson's practice" I will quote one
or two passages. John Thompson says of his father*
"after having performed his daily task, he has

* James Thompson

been sent for the cows and so great was his fatigue of body from labour that on sitting down to rest he would unconsciously fall asleep, and that his father by calling to him has awoken him at the distance of half a mile". His theory of respiration is, that the infant first opens its mouth to cry, the air rushes in and inflates the lungs and the atmospheric pressure on the chest forces it out again. He believes, also that the stock of flesh and blood laid up in youth are for support in after years. "The quest of life" Thus I have given a fair specimen of the candour and consideration of the entire work. It is replete with errors and with all just what we should reasonably expect from any one who has always been shut out from the light of science, and confined to agricultural life. The Homoeopathic system although not quite so daring in its course yet in its results is nearly as important and vain. If by the power of the will man can stay the ravages of disease why

use the mite they give? All that is useful in their system is taken from the rich treasury of the regular physician. Diet and careful nursing which are the great secrets of their cures, are as well directed by all good physicians of the old schools as by them. But frequently not half as well observed, because the patient reposes more confidence in the other means employed. These are like the ice bergs of the ocean rolling towards the torrid zone until their last crystal is mingled with the silent deep. Sure as the summer sun dissolves the ice of winter so sure must these fade before the light of reason. Most of the thousand nostrums that have so long disgraced the world emanate from these sources, and they too often waver off the skill of the physician until the day is cast and the case is hopeless. In conclusion permit me to say Empiricism and ignorance are coworkers together to subvert the best interest of mankind, while the science of medicine comes to us clothed with the wisdom, learning and experience

of more than two thousand years. Founded
+ nurtured by the wisest and best of men until
it has become vast in its importance to all the
inhabitants of the earth. Vast in its resources,
vast in its ability and boundless in its efforts
to do good. It addresses itself to the consideration
of the inquirer with a full expectation
of a just approval. It presents to the object of
its care the only reasonable hope of benefit.

And although the acquisitions of its votaries may
have cost them toilsome days and sleepless nights, although
years of untiring labour and great riches may have
been the price of their skill. Yet they demand
no pay for patients, neither counsel or appropriate to
their ~~exclusive~~ use the benefits of their industry.
The knowledge of the profession is the common stock
of all its members. And now if this great and
united body of men whose minds are trained for
action and whose resources know no bounds can
 devise means that shall soon remove quackery, the
children of this generation will be more happy and
all succeeding ages will give them praise.



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